DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 262 772 IR 011 852

TITLE Accreditation and Authorization of Distance Learning through Telecommunications. Policy Statement.
INSTITUTION Council on Postsecondary Accreditation, Washington, D.C.; State Higher Education Executive Officers Association.
PUB DATE 84
NOTE 6p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055) -- Legal/Legislative/Regulatory Materials (090)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Accrediting Agencies; *Distance Education; Educational Quality; *Evaluation Methods; Guidelines; Institutional Cooperation; Instructional Innovation; Position Papers; Postsecondary Education; *Program Implementation; State Agencies; *Telecommunications; Telecourses

ABSTRACT

This statement summarizes the results of a 2-year study on assessing long distance learning by telecommunications. Supported by a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, the study focused on the rapid development and use of telecommunications to offer postsecondary education, and the need to ensure the quality and integrity of this instructional activity. After an initial definition of telecommunications instruction, guidelines for telecommunications education are provided in three sections: general principles, procedures, and implementation. The statements on general principles and procedures cover responsibilities of educational institutions, focus of states' authorization and non-governmental accreditation activities, and role of other institutions involved in telecommunications instruction. Specific recommendations are then made for the implementation of these responsibilities, including suggestions for communications between the various participating agencies and strategies for obtaining appropriate recognition from state agencies and accrediting bodies. Concluding remarks call for accrediting institutions to adopt the stated procedures and principles to ensure high quality and integrity of telecommunications instruction. (JB)

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Policy Statement

on

Accreditation and Authorization of Distance Learning Through Telecommunications

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
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Adopted by the Board
of the
Council on Postsecondary
Accreditation
October 11, 1984

and by the
State Higher Education
Executive Officers
Association
August 1, 1984

IR011852

Introduction

This Statement summarizes the results of a two year study on assessing long distance learning by telecommunications. The study, co-sponsored by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation and the State Higher Education Executive Officers Association, focused on the rapid development and use of telecommunications to offer postsecondary education and the need to ensure the quality and integrity of this instructional activity. It was supported by a grant from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, whose views it does not necessarily reflect.

A series of task forces and advisory committees were responsible for developing the components in the Statement. During their deliberations, each group affirmed the need to address the quality of telecommunications instruction within the existing assessment framework, which includes state authorization, non-governmental voluntary accreditation, and institutional self-regulation. This belief is reinforced in the principles and procedures which follow. The following definition was used during the study.

Telecommunications instruction is any course or series of courses offered or sponsored by a postsecondary education institution, consortium of institutions, or other organization, for which credit is offered or awarded toward a certificate, diploma, or degree. The course or courses must have, as the primary mode of delivery, television, video cassette or disc, film, radio, computer, or other supportive devices which build upon the audio-video format. In many instances, the telecommunications course is supported by textbooks, study guides, library resources, and other study aids, and may also involve personal interaction with faculty, tutors, or other educational personnel by telephone, mail, or in face-to-face meetings.

I. General Principles

A. The assessment of programs delivered by telecommunications should take place within the context of an institution's or other organization's total educational mission.

B. The policies and procedures for assessing long distance learning should not discourage the development and use of technology for educational purposes. Specific requirements by state authorizing agencies and accrediting bodies should accommodate constructive innovation.

C. The focus of states' authorization and of non-governmental accreditation activity in long distance learning by telecommunications should be on postsecondary institutions and other organizations which award credit that can be applied toward academic degrees, or which provide other credentials that have credit bearing significance such as programs leading to certification of proficiency or licensure. Authorization and accreditation requirements should not apply to those institutions and organizations which are involved only in the production of courses or support materials.

D. State authorization activities are and should be the initial step and a necessary prerequisite to accreditation in the assessment of long distance learning by telecommunications.

E. The states have a responsibility in consumer protection which should be reinforced as necessary. States without adequate authorization legislation are urged to develop such legislation.

F. Institutions and other organizations involved in telecommunications instruction, as in other instructional activities, should use and further develop rigorous outcome measures to assess program effectiveness. Accrediting bodies and state authorizing agencies should validate and use such measures to the greatest possible extent in their evaluation activities.

G. The focus of the assessment activity for long distance learning by telecommunications conducted by educational institutions should be accreditation, either institutional or professional as appropriate to the offerings.

H. The interests of higher education and the general public are best served when institutions voluntarily seek appropriate approval even in situations in which they may not be required to do so. Toward this end, the accreditation and authorization of telecommunications-based educational programs should be thorough and reasonable. If this can be accomplished, then the institutional burden of seeking approval will be

a reasonable price to pay for increased public confidence.

I. The necessity of an institution's seeking state authorization depends in large measure upon the institution's "physical presence" in the state or states in which it wishes to operate. Although there is yet no clear legal definition of "physical presence" the following guidelines have been developed:
   1. The act of transmitting an electronic signal into another state without any other contact within that state does not, under current laws, constitute physical presence. Similarly, the use of an interstate interactive computer system to deliver educational services, absent any other in-state contact, would not necessarily create jurisdiction over the out-of-state institution.
   2. The use of interstate mail and telephone services to provide instructional and related services to students involves protected interstate commerce and, therefore, generally cannot be subjected to state regulation.
   3. The presence of an institutional recruiter (agent) in a state may constitute sufficient physical presence of an institution in that state to subject it to licensure. It may also subject the institution to other legal constraints.
   4. Support services that include institutional representatives in a state, such as tutors, counselors, or instructors, in most instances establish physical presence sufficient to afford the state jurisdiction through its approval mechanism.

II. Procedures

A. A primary and fundamental objective is the development of close working relations among state authorizing agencies, accrediting bodies, and institutions. They should undertake to reexamine and develop regulations, standards, and criteria for use in the evaluation of instruction delivered by telecommunications. State agencies and accrediting bodies should work together to ensure that state authorization provisions and procedures and accrediting standards complement each other. By undertaking this joint effort, a second objective of reducing the multiple and repetitive procedures currently required for institutions operating in several jurisdictions may be realized. The following procedures are suggested as an initial step toward meeting those objectives:
   1. With respect to the states:
      a. States should provide mechanisms to exchange information with each other and with accrediting bodies concerning standards, procedures, and actions relating to the authorization of institutions to operate and grant degrees.
      b. State authorizing agencies should seek more uniform authorization requirements so that educational institutions eventually can receive authorization in all jurisdictions through common assessment procedures.
      c. The states have constitutional and statutory responsibility to provide and supervise education. In those states where statutes providing supervision of postsecondary institutions currently do not exist, appropriate legislation should be sought, and the means for reviewing and authorizing educational operations and institutions should be established. Due consideration should be given to instruction delivered by telecommunications.
      d. The State Higher Education Executive Officers Association should continue to work closely with the states to attain these objectives.
   2. With respect to regional, national, and specialized accrediting bodies:
      a. Accrediting bodies should continue to develop standards and procedures for off-campus programs, including instruction delivered by telecommunications, in harmony with the COPA policy statement on off-campus operations and institutional and accrediting bodies' agreements of understanding.

b. Accrediting bodies, through COPA, should create better mechanisms for the exchange of information with each other and with all affected state agencies concerning standards, procedures, and actions relating to the accreditation of institutions and programs and their off-campus activities, including instruction delivered by telecommunications.

c. Accrediting bodies, as they do now for all other programs, should require institutions involved in long distance learning by telecommunications to have the appropriate authorization to operate in any state in which they wish to offer instruction.

d. Accrediting bodies should require demonstration by an institution or, in the case of specialized accreditation, by the program under evaluation that its students achieve the educational objectives set for them. Currently accepted criteria of accreditation can be applied to institutions and programs offering long distance learning or using telecommunications and other electronic techniques. These criteria require, in accordance with accreditation standards, that institutions or programs:

   1) Have clearly defined and appropriate educational objectives.
   2) Have the resources and structure needed to accomplish these objectives.
   3) Demonstrate that these objectives are being accomplished.
   4) Give reasons to believe that these objectives will continue to be accomplished.

e. The Council on Postsecondary Accreditation should continue to work closely with accrediting bodies to attain these objectives.

III. Implementation

The following specific procedures are suggested to effect these recommendations:

A. An institution should give to the appropriate state agencies and accrediting bodies advance notice of intent to initiate programs using telecommunications that provide credit applicable toward degrees.

B. To obtain appropriate recognition from state agencies and accrediting bodies, the following strategy is suggested:

   1. An institution would provide documentation on the objectives and scope of its programs using telecommunications, including provision for instruction and instructional support. This information would be provided on the Institutional Profile for Telecommunications Instruction, a document designed to provide state agencies and accrediting bodies with crucial information about telecommunications-based activities.
   2. State agencies and accrediting bodies would review the documentation to determine whether the instruction and instructional support meet the established requirements and standards.
   3. The documentation would be audited, as appropriate, by state agencies and accrediting bodies and certified as being complete, accurate, and representative of the institution's telecommunications activities. The certified documentation could then be made available to any state agency or accrediting body needing such information.
   4. If proper quality and quality controls are evident, approval would be granted by state agencies and accrediting bodies to include the activity within the institution's recognized status.
   5. If necessary to reach a sound decision, a state agency or accrediting body may request additional documentation or schedule an on-site visit. The institution, for its part, may withdraw its request without prejudice or appeal any adverse decision to the appropriate body or bodies consistent with due process procedures.

C. Interregional or other agreements envisioning a single accrediting activity for an institution, conducted cooperatively by two

or more accrediting bodies, should be fully implemented as they relate to long distance learning so that the accreditation of an institution can be conducted in a single process.

Conclusion

The principles and procedures recommended in this Statement were formulated to ensure the highest quality and integrity of instruction delivered by telecommunications. If adopted by state authorizing agencies and accrediting bodies, there will be a better likelihood of increased cooperation between them, and an important step will have been taken toward instituting common, reasonable and thorough approval practices.

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MARCH 14 - 1986